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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4529
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0848
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9624
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4138
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1596
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3318
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6719
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4333
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0727
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0728
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0373
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2661
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0304
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000617

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: ICRC: DIMINISHING ACCESS

REF: A. RANGOON 603

[1](#)B. RANGOON 272

[1](#)C. RANGOON 56

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Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: ICRC's Burma operations remain in a state of flux as the organization faces increased GOB restrictions on access to detention facilities and border areas. It must also cope with the interference of Government-affiliated organizations. To make matters worse, the Ministry of Health, which now oversees ICRC's operations, has neither the clout nor the inclination to go to bat for the NGO and its politically sensitive programs. ICRC has cut its expatriate staff in half over the past eight months, and has not ruled out withdrawing from Burma altogether. ICRC's head of delegation advises that the U.S. could help by encouraging Asian governments to raise concerns with the GOB. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On May 3, Patrick Vial, Head of Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), called on the Charge to discuss his organization's recent tribulations in Burma. ICRC's Burma operations have suffered setbacks since August 2005, when Government-affiliated organizations (GONGOS) starting interfering with ICRC programs and the GOB began to restrict access to detention facilities and to border areas (refs B and C). Vial showed us maps indicating ICRC's broad access throughout all regions of Burma that grew annually until 2004. ICRC access has now shrunk to only two sites today.

[1](#)3. (C) Vial said that the October 2004 ouster of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and subsequent leadership changes at the Ministry of Home Affairs were not good for ICRC. "The situation remains grim," he said, noting that the GOB continues to restrict ICRC access to detention facilities and

to certain categories of prisoners, including Khin Nyunt and other victims of the 2004 purge. The most troubling source of ICRC's current woes is the regime's mass-member organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). Local USDA members have demanded the right to accompany ICRC on their visits, including with prisoners. "No one in the GOB dares to tell the USDA to back off or to accommodate ICRC needs," said Vial.

¶4. (C) In January, the GOB switched responsibility for the ICRC from Home Affairs to the Ministry of Health (MOH). "It's been a disaster," said Vial, "because the Health officials have no mandate, no authority, and no understanding of ICRC prison visits." Vial could not obtain a meeting with the Minister of Health for three months. When he finally secured a meeting in April, he found the Minister "steely-eyed, aggressive, and glued to the party line."

¶5. (C) Vial said that he succeeded in getting tentative authorization from MOH to visit two detention facilities, hopefully within the next few weeks. However, the Ministry has not yet addressed any of the existing restrictions and GONGO interference issues. ICRC, Vial said, may have to once again curtail its prison visits and attempt to renegotiate access conditions.

¶6. (C) Vial said that he will soon travel to his Geneva headquarters to discuss options for the future of ICRC's Burma operation. ICRC could decide to withdraw entirely from Burma; reduce its presence and wait for better times; or maintain the status quo, doing only what the GOB permits while attempting to improve access. Vial offered his own view that ICRC will probably stay the course, since it would be extremely difficult to regain a presence in Burma if the organization decided to pull out now. He added that as a

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result of access problems over the past eight months, ICRC has already reduced its expatriate staff in half, from 60 to 30 employees.

¶7. (C) The GOB's poor treatment of ICRC, said Vial, has harmed its primary objective in Burma: protection of security detainees, including political prisoners. "Our primary focus is not delivering goodies," he said, "but having regular access to the thousands of detainees within the country's vast network of prisons and labor camps."

¶8. (C) Vial noted that despite current access difficulties, ICRC remains very active in Burma. ICRC staff provide crucial travel support for the families of prisoners, many of whom are NLD members detained in isolated prisons. Vial admitted that lack of access to prisons made continuing family support a challenge, since ICRC could not ascertain in many cases where the GOB has actually moved individual prisoners. ICRC has also been very active in providing prosthetics and physical rehabilitation for thousands of land mine victims; promoting respect and understanding for international humanitarian laws; and capacity building for the national Red Cross society.

Comment: A Hot Potato Without a Patron

¶9. (C) Most international organizations and NGOs in Burma require a senior-level regime patron in order to function effectively. Prior to October 2004, many organizations relied on General Khin Nyunt and his military intelligence apparatus to facilitate access and to ensure adequate support from relevant ministries. These days, however, SPDC Chairman Than Shwe's disdain for the international community has left UN agencies and NGOs scrambling for cover, with wildly inconsistent and unpredictable results (ref A).

¶10. (C) ICRC is clearly a political hot potato. The hand-off from Home Affairs, which has responsibility for prisons, to the Health Ministry has only compounded its problems. The

Minister of Health, a rare technocrat within the militarized GOB cabinet, has a good reputation among health NGOs and many UN agencies for his cooperation on HIV/AIDS, AI, and other issues. ICRC's mandate is much more sensitive, however, and the Health Minister has neither the clout nor the inclination to go to bat for the NGO with senior generals and risk his other ongoing health programs. This leaves Patrick Vial and his colleagues in a very difficult situation. He advised that direct U.S. pressure on the SPDC to allow ICRC access would likely make matters worse. Instead, Vial suggested, a stronger push for Asian governments to raise their concerns with the GOB could help ICRC regain access to Burma's thousands of forgotten prisoners. End Comment.

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